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AUTHOR Edwards, Jean P.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the project described in this paper was to conduct research on curricular strategies that would facilitate successful transition of handicapped youth from public school to postsecondary work and leisure environments. The curriculum strategies involved teaching skills in searching for leisure activities prior to introducing a job search curriculum for an intervention group of mildly mentally retarded and learning-disabled high-school students. Findings showed that 81% of mildly handicapped high-school students receiving a job search education found employment, while 58% of a similar group of students without special training found jobs. Intervention group students used six out of seven possible job search techniques, while control group students reported using only two out of seven. The intervention group found jobs that could be grouped in seven different occupational areas, whereas the control group found jobs in only five different occupational areas. Parents assisted students during the job search primarily by helping with job applications, providing transportation, and networking with friends for job leads. Transition programs are urged to include training in using the phone book and in developing networking skills. (JDD)

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Final Report

of the Portland State University

Secondary School to Work Transition Research Project

Emphasizing Transitions to Work and Leisure Roles

*OSERS Research funded
1985-1988*

and

contributions from The PSU Foundation

*Dr. Jean P. Edwards, Director
Mr. Martin Kimeldorf, Project Coordinator
Ms. Carolyn Bradley, Project Assistant*

EC 221262

BACKGROUND

Portland State University (PSU) transition project demonstrated that teachers can make a difference. In the PSU school-to-work transition project, mildly handicapped high school students receiving a job search education found employment at 81% while a similar group of students without special training found jobs at 58%. Eighty percent of our students testify to the difference educators can make!

In August, 1988, PSU concluded a three-part national research project funded by OSERS. First, we set up job search classes in five local schools. Second, we collected data about background, training, and employment. Third, we explored the re-use of job search skills in the search for leisure opportunities.* The methods used, the test results, and the employment and leisure findings are summarized in this paper.

PROJECT GOALS AND DESIGN

The project began by identifying ways to measure successful transitions. This resulted in the design of an in-depth research document called MOST (Measures Of Successful Transition). This document became our research guide for data collection about such things as students' school performance, attendance, and educational planning. Other areas surveyed included parental expectations, student job search skills and behaviors, leisure attitudes, and employment follow-up.

An important project goal was to develop practical and realistic interventions. As a result, we identified commercially available curriculums that could be taught in a semester-long class, as part of the regular school day. We looked for student workbooks teaching self-directed job search skills. By using similar classroom workbooks, we could ensure that employment outcomes were not the result of different teaching strategies and materials.

The positive employment results are not based on new technologies or specialized clinical settings. The results are simply the product of hard working resource room teachers who committed themselves to teaching a job search course for one period over an entire semester. This commitment yielded positive results in several different areas according to the data collected by the PSU staff. These areas included data about student job search competencies, job search behaviors outside of class, and the satisfaction reported by parents, teachers and students.

* We feel that the definition of "transition success" should be expanded to include other facets of adult life.

Job Search Competencies

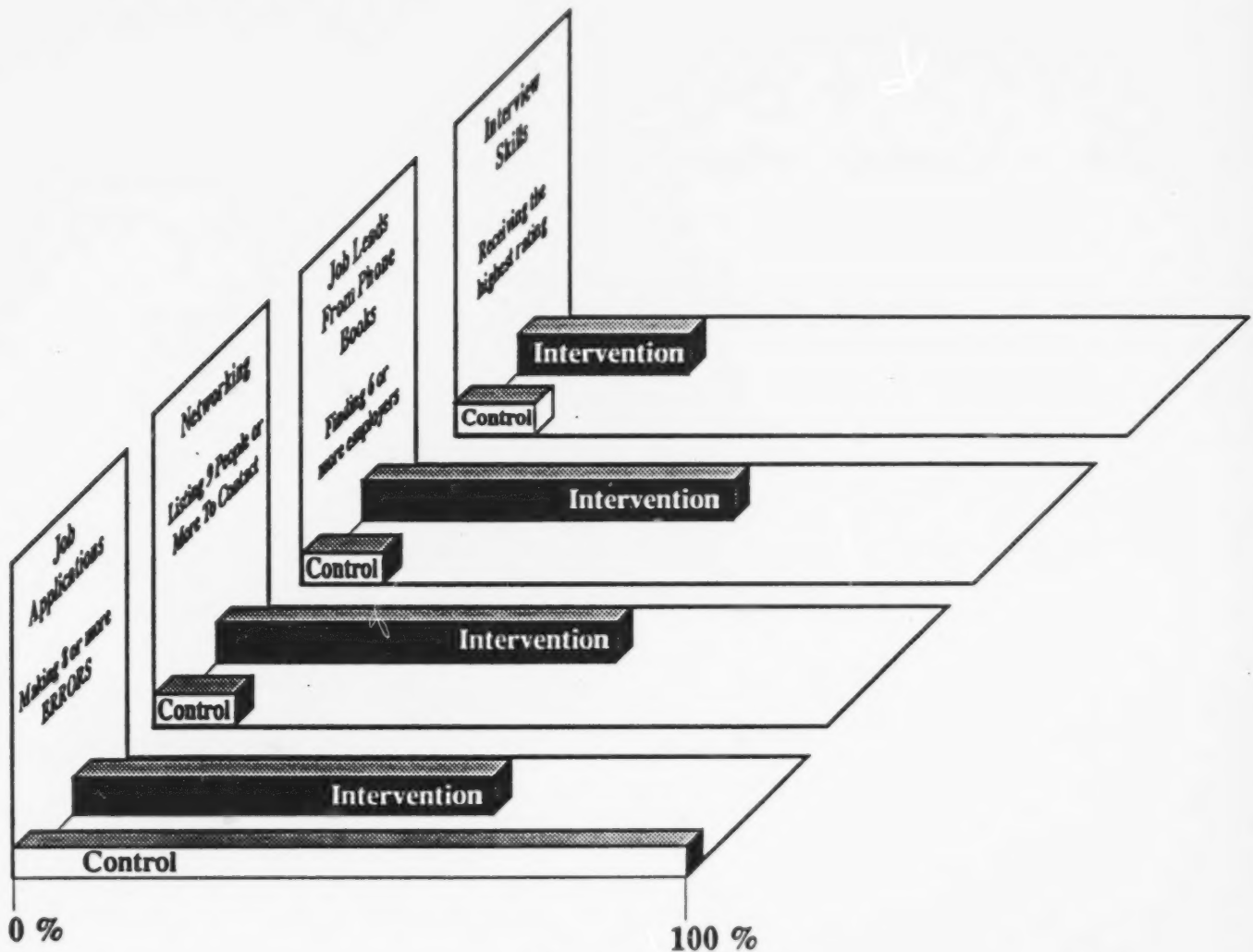


Figure 1

The intervention group made fewer errors than the control group in standard techniques of interviewing and filling out job applications. They scored much higher than the control group in networking skills such as listing prospective employers and using the phone book to find other contacts.

THE PSU PROJECT RESEARCH METHODS

The students receiving job search training are labelled as the *intervention* group and the students without this intervention are labelled as the *control* group. The total student population in the study spanned urban through suburban and rural sites. Three-fifths of the sites were concentrated in urban schools (in the Portland Public School system).

Five high school sites were chosen each semester in the Portland, Oregon vicinity. These included sites from three inner city, one small town, and one suburban school. Students were selected if they were mildly handicapped, 17 years or older, and interested in work. A control group of similar students was identified in each school.

The project used a team-teaching partnership between PSU graduate students in Special Education and local classroom teachers. Graduate students completed practicum and student teaching requirements while studying job search training in a transition seminar. The graduate students became a vital link to the classroom and did all of the data collection.

JOB SEARCH COMPETENCE TESTING

The job search competence assessment tool required students to demonstrate their actual job search skills. This was done in three tests. The first involved a structured-interview by a stranger. Each interviewer used specific questions grouped into typical interview categories like *openers*, *personal*, *probing*, and *work experience*, and included ratings of appearance, demeanor, and interview closings. Each interview question spelled out specific criteria for ratings from below-average to superior. See Figure 1.

The second testing area required completion of a job application. Applications were carefully evaluated for specific errors (spelling, incompleteness, appearance, etc.). Lastly, students were asked to list their network contacts and use a phone book to identify possible employers. The results are shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

JOB APPLICATION, NETWORKING, & PHONE BOOK COMPETENCIES		
COMPETENCIES	CONTROL GROUP	INTERVENTION GROUP
JOB APPLICATION		
Making 8 errors or more	100.0 %	62.7 %
NETWORKING		
Able to identify 9 people or more	21.9 %	60.4 %
PHONE BOOK USAGE		
Scoring 3 or more points	21.9 %	56.0 %
<i>Figure 2</i>		

INTERVIEW COMPETENCIES FOR THOSE RECEIVING HIGHEST SCORES		
INTERVIEW COMPETENCIES	CONTROL GROUP	INTERVENTION GROUP
INITIAL GREETING	16.0 %	61.5 %
APPEARANCE	9.7 %	40.4 %
INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS	14.7 %	54.4 %
ABILITY TO DESCRIBE SKILLS	11.8 %	42.1 %
ANSWERING EMPLOYER'S CONCERNS & PROBINGS	11.8 %	42.0%
REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS ABOUT PAY AND CONDITIONS	14.7 %	50.9 %
ASKS APPROPRIATE QUESTIONS	8.8 %	39.3 %
ENDS INTERVIEW EFFECTIVELY	8.8 %	35.1 %
<i>Figure 3</i>		

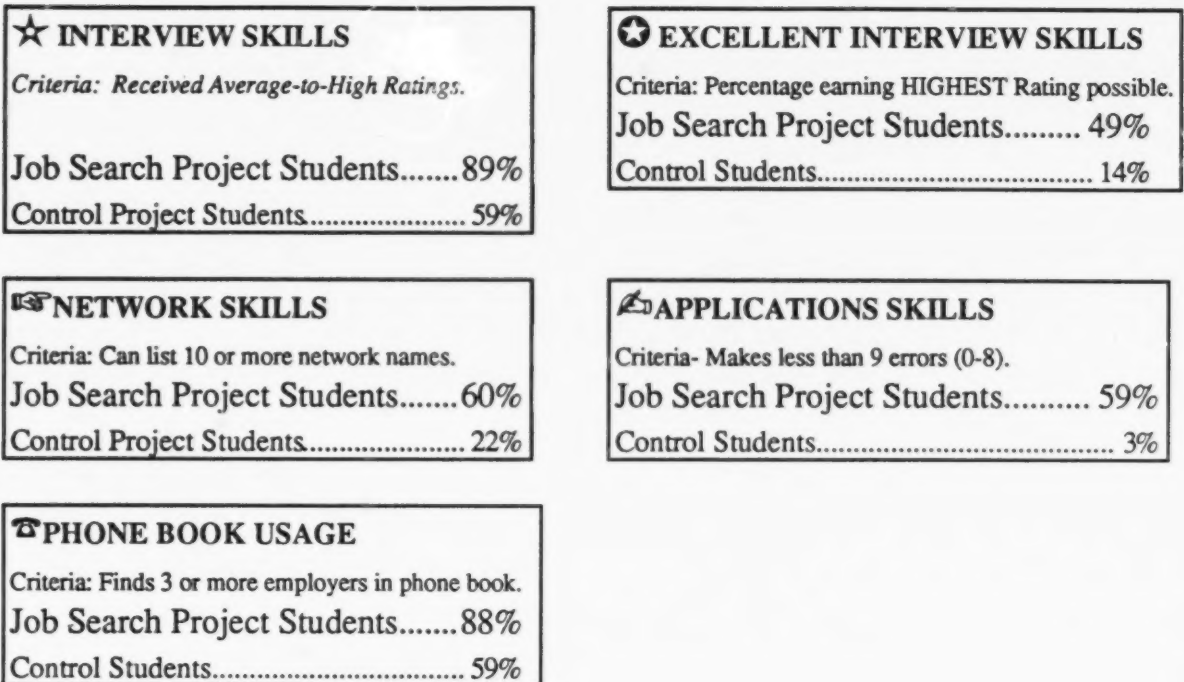


Figure 4

LESSONS FOR JOB SEARCH PROGRAMS

We can derive several useful teaching suggestions for improving job search training. Our data suggests changing the way we measure employment outcomes. The findings also suggest that we can teach job application, phone book usage, and networking skills differently.

First we must consider how to measure success for full time students. Full (100%) employment may be unrealistic (and even undesirable) for student programs. However, we can measure success with a combination assessment of employment and competence. Additionally, the purest sample of employment for students may take place in the summer, when conflict with school is reduced.

Second, many past methods may not contribute significantly to employment. Production of a perfect job application by students with reading and writing deficits may not be a realistic goal. Instead of striving for zero errors on a job application (which neither group

of students achieved), we chose to teach students how to write positively about their unique talents. Too much job application practice for students may turn a job search course into an experience of tedium. Our approach proved feasible because students can often find the help they need at home when filling out individual applications. Our home phone survey showed that the most common form of help parents gave young job seekers was in completing job applications. See Figure 5.

HOW PARENTS HELP STUDENTS DURING THE JOB SEARCH	
Job Search Area.....	Percent Who Said They Helped
Help complete a job application	73 %
Provide Transportation	62 %
Network with friends for leads	51 %
Buy clothes.....	38 %
Read the want ads	35 %
Network at their place of work.....	24 %
Help with letters or resumes	15 %
Contact an employment agency.....	14 %

Figure 5

Third, using the phone book and phone to find jobs becomes an important job skill. This is because 81% of the new jobs are typically found in small businesses and this turns the phone book into a giant list of possible employers. Most of the control students demonstrated limited abilities in using a phone book. Therefore, training in using the phone book should be part of transition programs for mildly handicapped students.

Another important finding deals with network skills. All of the research on the U.S. labor market shows the importance of uncovering hidden job opportunities through *networking*. Therefore it is critical to teach students how to creatively identify and expand their network contacts. The leisure search curriculum reinforced the networking skills because leisure opportunities are not listed in the *classifieds*. The leisure search curriculum introduces the student to networking and phoning skills in an enjoyable and non-competitive search.

The project data (and common sense) suggests that when students complete a job search education in school, they become more competent in tomorrow's labor market.

EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

One of the most important questions asked in this research was, "What do students actually do after training?" To determine this, the project staff surveyed families to find out which job search methods were used by the student. The results show the positive impact of training. Students were asked to identify the methods they used from a list of seven job search methods. The intervention group reported using six out of seven possible techniques, while the control group reported using only two out of seven. Job search experts advocate using as many different techniques as possible. For instance, Richard Bolles urges job seekers to exceed the averages of using only 1.6 different methods. However, a student cannot use a technique if he or she does not feel confident. In the project classrooms, confidence is built up through demonstration, role playing, and coached practice.

The one technique all job seekers reported using was networking. It was noted that the students in the intervention group scored higher in the job search competency of networking. Another interesting finding was that the students who received both a job and leisure search education scored even higher in their networking skills than those students receiving only job search training for the 18-week semester. This is logical because the search for leisure is primarily a network research project. For example, to find a woodcarving opportunity requires research about possible woodcarving clubs or classes. This research might involve going through different networks like lumberyards, specialty wood shops, parks and recreation departments, cutleries, friends, etc. See Figure 6.

Another tactic reportedly used by successful job seekers is persistent follow-up or checking back with employers. Of those employed, 100% of the students in the

intervention group reported checking back, whereas only 33% of the control group reported this behavior. The reason again may be greater confidence.

METHODS USED BY SUCCESSFUL SEEKERS TO LEARN OPENINGS		
TECHNIQUES USED	CONTROL GROUP	INTERVENTION GROUP
NETWORKING with people outside of the family.	✓	✓
DIRECT CONTACT #1 Go in and ask for an application.	--	✓
DIRECT CONTACT #2 Go in and ask to speak to manager.	--	✓
SCHOOL AGENCY Ask for help at school.	✓	✓
PARENTS Solicit their help.	--	✓
AGENCY Public or Private employment agency.	--	✓
<i>Figure 6</i>		

WORK LIFE QUALITY?

Another basic question asked was, "Would students find more work or better jobs?" This seems like a simple question until one tries to define the words "better jobs." For example, if only a third of the students are seniors, then it is likely that the majority will be looking for jobs in the part-time to full-time range. This is what was found for both the control and intervention groups. The wages were also similarly concentrated in the minimum wage category for both groups. It must be recalled that the intervention was designed to increase employment by increasing job search behaviors. There is no claim that job search adds to one's vocational skill stature. Obviously the most powerful combination is a program with both vocational and job search components. See Figure 7.

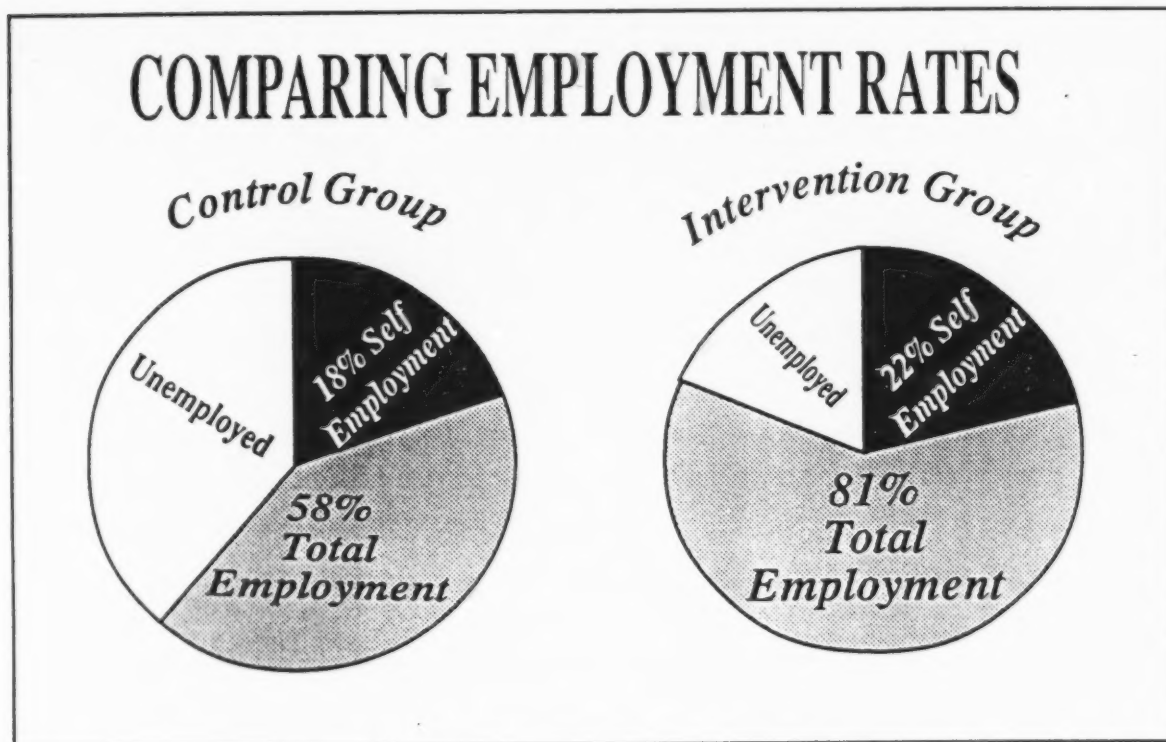


Figure 7

One finding suggested that the quality of work life might be improved with a job search education. This finding revealed that the intervention group seemed to locate more diverse kinds of jobs than the control group. The intervention group found jobs that could be grouped in seven different occupational areas, whereas the control group found jobs in only five different occupational areas. Additionally, two-thirds of the control group found jobs concentrated in the traditional areas of food service and maintenance jobs, whereas a few intervention students found jobs in other areas like sales, repair, and education. See Figure 8 and Figure 9.

Occupational Diversity

*Stacking up the different jobs found
by the Control and Intervention Groups*

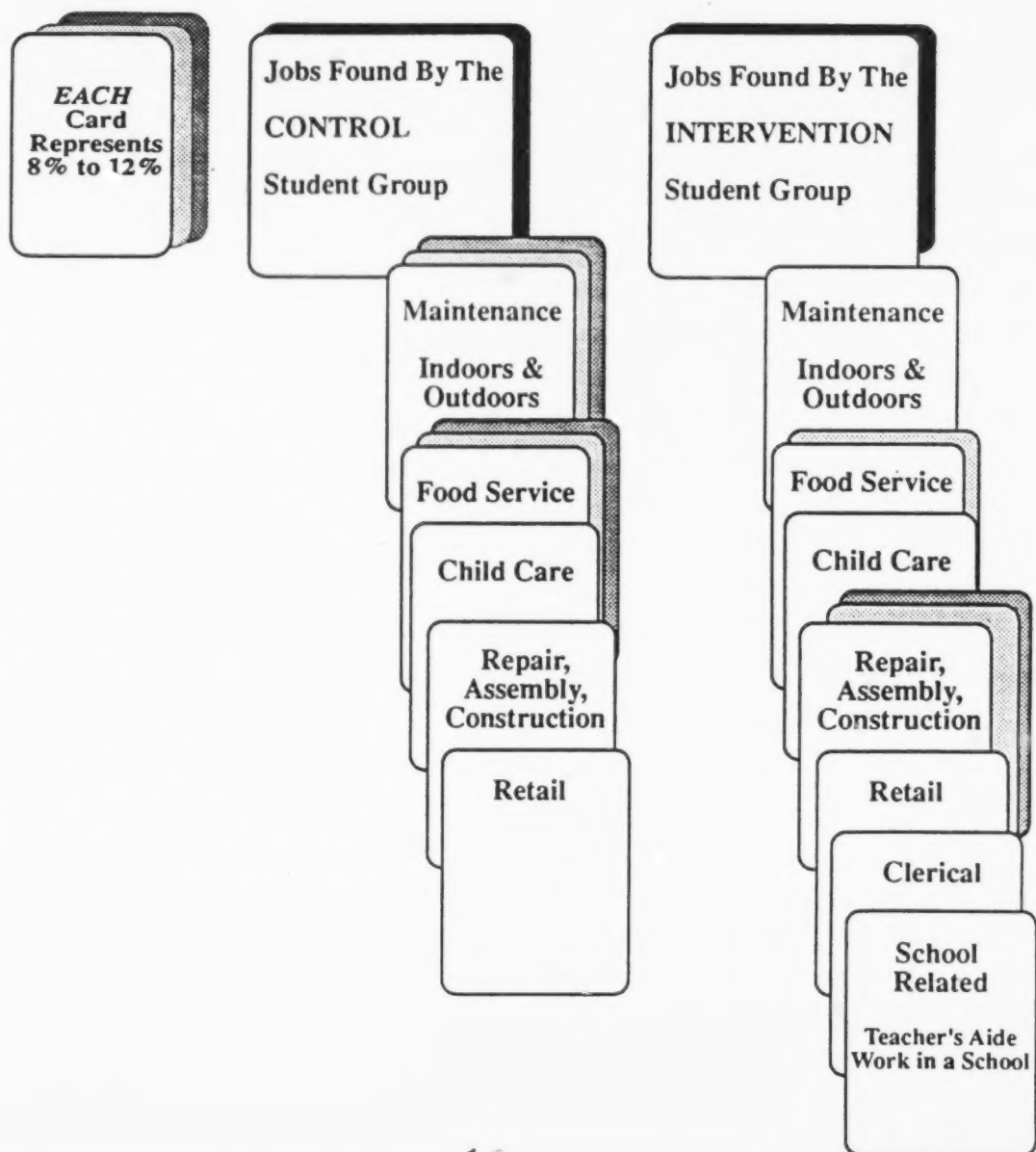


Figure 8

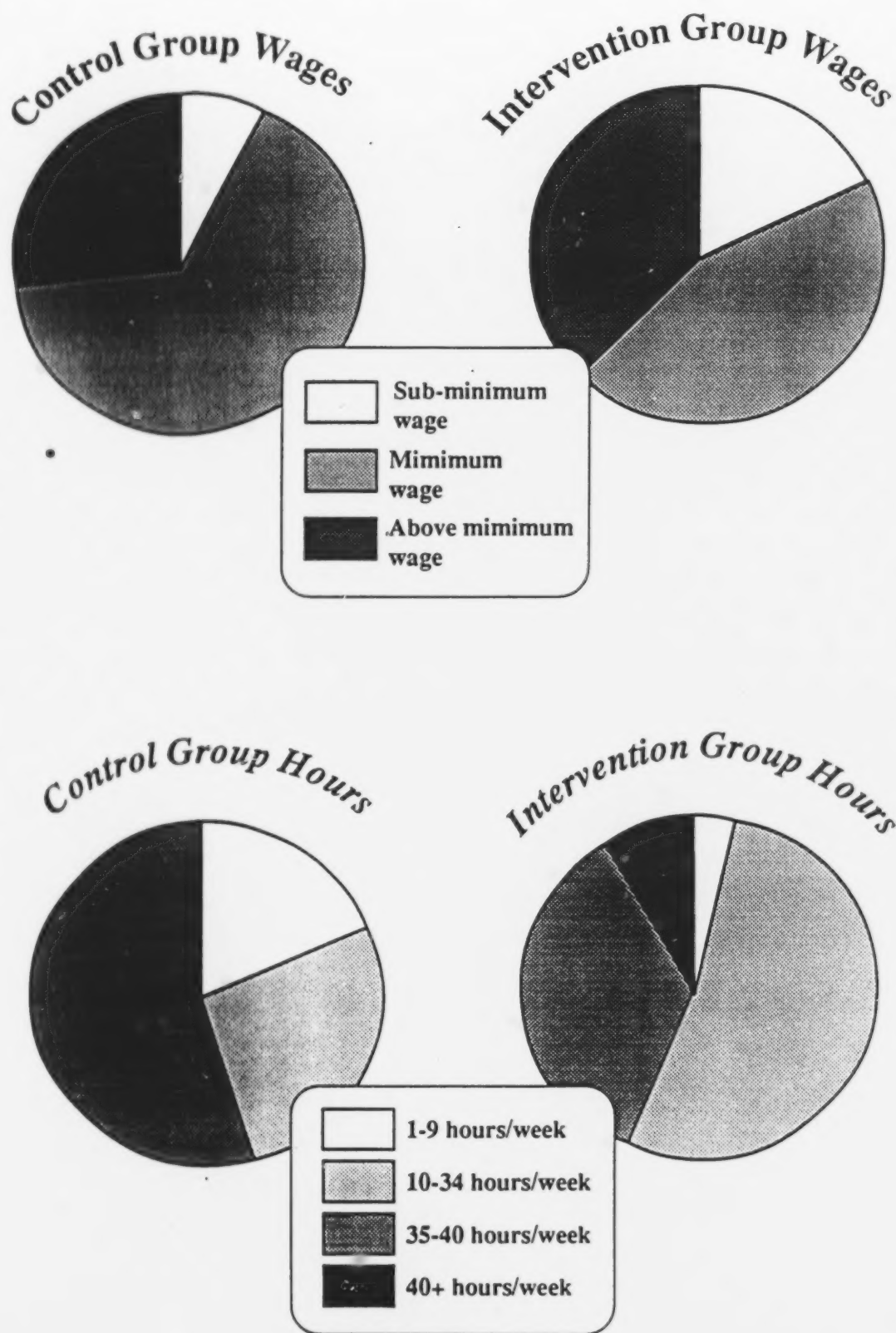


Figure 9

LEISURE TRANSITIONS

Leisure transitions is a new domain in secondary mildly handicapped education programs. Our program* also postulated that the search for leisure might be improved by re-using methods developed in job search classes. In fact, it was felt that these skills might be even more valuable in a leisure search because it appeared that leisure opportunities are even more hidden. For example, leisure options are far more diverse than labor market options, and there is no centralized listing like the classified section of a newspaper. The re-use of job search skills meant a more wholistic view of work *and* leisure could emerge. The leisure search curriculum preceded the job search. This was because a leisure search involves less rejection and competition. The other advantage in teaching both searches is the broader appeal. Almost all students will find something of interest through either their work or leisure explorations.

In the connecting stage, the job seekers are looking for employers, while leisure search students are trying to answer seven basic questions. These are listed next:

1. Where can I go to enjoy this leisure experience?
2. How long will it take to learn?
3. What classes do I need to take? What must I do to join?
4. What group could I join to learn more?
5. How much might I spend on this leisure experience?
6. How much time might I spend doing this each week? Each month?
7. What will my travel needs be?

To become successful in either a work or leisure search, students need to be organized and methodical. To help them stay organized students were shown various forms for storing, collecting, and managing the information they get during the search. Job clubs

* There were two intervention models. Approximately four-fifths of the students received a pure job search education across an 18-week semester. One-fifth of the students received training in leisure search and job search techniques for approximately nine weeks each. The searches for leisure and work opportunities share many similar problem-solving steps: self-assessment, goal setting, networking, planning. The shared processes help reinforce the general problem-solving skills common to the transition to work and leisure.

pioneered this method by providing students with forms for names, phone surveys, thank you notes, etc.

Learning how to become persistent in the face of adversity is another important behavior to master. Too many job seekers withdraw from active looking after only a few rejections. In field testing, we found that students encounter similar frustrations when trying to contact busy people. Learning how to handle rejection or frustration under the guidance of a teacher or coach and learning how others handle this during support group discussions can be an invaluable life expanding process.

INTEGRATING WORK SEARCH AND LEISURE SEARCH

The PSU project staff feels that today's students experience increasing amounts of stress often related to daily tension, increasing academic requirements, and worry over career opportunities. Students who drown in this stress often become at-risk of not graduating. These at-risk students often feel lost and see only limited opportunities for their work or leisure lives.

In a larger sense, the alienated attitudes of youth appear to surface later in the adult world of work and leisure. This is often indicated in surveys about work and leisure satisfaction. For example, 80% of Americans feel underemployed. Of those employed, 53% say their jobs are unsatisfying and 30% feel their jobs are bad for their health. Fifty percent change jobs every five years in search of something better. Leisure roles are also at risk (Bolles, 1981). Americans spend \$77 billion on leisure and only 55% say they find their leisure pursuits satisfying (McDowell, 1983). All of these statistics begin to profile a community at-risk—a community of unfulfilled, restless souls. One of the pioneers in vocational aptitude testing, Johnson O'Connor, summarized this situation when he stated that the aptitudes we have and fail to use become the source of our greatest frustration. O'Connor went on to suggest that the average job only demands that we use a few of our talents. This means that many people will only find fulfillment when they look for opportunities in both their work and leisure lives.

The goal of the Portland State University project was not to gloss over the changing social and economic conditions that concern many Americans. Our goal was to empower people with information gathering skills. In an increasingly competitive environment we hope to teach young and old how to more effectively hunt for the hidden opportunities that seem to lie just beneath the surface. The search for opportunities in work and leisure

will probably span a lifetime. It is important that we teach about the integration of these two searches upon leaving school and later upon retirement. The Portland State University transition project was responsive to these needs and successfully achieved this goal.

PARTICIPANTS' SATISFACTION

The other question asked was, "What do the teachers, students and guardians think of this intervention?" The results were gratifying. All three groups rated near the top of a satisfaction questionnaire the perception that the student had improved his or her self-confidence. Parents and teachers observed that the students appeared to be more actively looking for work. Students reported a sense of mastering specific job search techniques related to interviewing, networking, job applications, etc.

In addition teachers soon became advocates for the need to provide job search training to high school youth. For example, 62% of the teachers requested working with the project more than one semester. In the winter of 1988, approximately 77% of the teachers associated with the project indicated that they planned to provide some form of job search training in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

Within this changing social milieu, how can educators help their students improve the quality of their school-to-work transitions?

First of all, educators can recognize that some of the forces are beyond the scope of school reform and require a political or social reform. For example, educators could link their educational concerns to social realities by becoming advocates of a minimum wage that pays a living wage. If the wage became a true living wage, entry level jobs would become more attractive and employers might begin selecting applicants based on secondary criteria such as finishing various levels of education. This might help at-risk students find the motivation to stay in school.

Second, the interventions suggested in the PSU and Washington studies suggest that all students can benefit from job search training. In the final years of the PSU project, several teachers recruited students from the school at large and combined them in classes serving mildly handicapped students. They reported that this blended service delivery resulted in higher levels of motivation and performance for the special education

students.* It became a fine testimonial to mainstreaming efforts. As more and more LD students are placed back into the mainstream this can become an opportunity to provide job search training to all students regardless of their label, non-label, or learning needs.

Third, one can recognize that job turnover demands a more vigorous and more precise response than generic or traditional vocational and academic requirements. If students are going to have some sort of choice in the future, they need to leave the school system with job search competencies and the confidence to use them. A job search program should belong as an equal partner in the core curriculum. Perhaps the great lesson of the 1980s is the notion that the Horatio Alger dream of upward mobility has exceeded its warranty period. As a result the only guarantee that will last a lifetime today is the promise that students will need to use their job search skills across a lifetime. It is time for educators to bring their curriculums in congruence with this reality.

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* In 1983 Martin Kimeldorf organized a job club combining LD and MR students with non-special education students from a Diversified Occupations class after school. The mixture proved to be very useful and helped all students to achieve more thorough cooperative learning. It was felt that the lower functioning special education students gained confidence from working in groups with other students and in seeing their peers aggressively attack the local labor market.

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DETAILED REPORT AVAILABLE

A complete 60-page report of the project has been prepared in a manuscript entitled, *Numbers That Spell Success*. To find out more about acquiring this report, write to Dr. Jean Edwards, Special Education Department, Portland State University, Box 751, Portland, Oregon, 97207.